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Walk with Dinosaurs and Mingle with Mammoths in Prehistoric Texas

By Suzanne Stavinoha

If you've traveled to your share of historic sites, like a 19th-century battleground or a presidential birthplace, why not time-travel to the "way, way back" along the Prehistoric Texas Trail. Visit excavations that are millions of years old and connect with your inner caveperson.



While the State of Texas came into being in 1836, the *land* that is Texas has been around a lot longer--approximately 600 million years. Over that time, earthquakes and volcanoes pushed and pulled the land, creating mountains and inland seas that became habitats for early reptiles, mammals, and eventually humans. Those early Texans are gone, but evidence of their existence lives on, and luckily is available for we modern-day mammals to view.

Some of the Lone Star State's best sites and exhibits are along the Prehistoric Texas Trail, which runs roughly north/south through the center of the state. With stops at several of these spots, we turned a recent drive from Fort Worth to Austin into a trip back in time.

Dinosaur Valley State Park

Our first stop was Glen Rose, a small town just south of Fort Worth. It's called the "Dinosaur Capital of Texas" because—113 million years ago--hundreds of dinosaurs used the nearby Paluxy River bed as a sort of pedestrian highway. Their footprints were captured in thick mud that hardened over time, leaving an abundance of tracks and trails that still are visible today at Dinosaur Valley State Park.

After paying the \$7 day fee, we parked in the lot closest to Site One, the largest of the four sites that make up the park. In a very un-prehistoric move, I pulled out my smartphone and logged onto the park's website. Using my phone's GPS, I was able to open links on the site that would show us exactly where each set of tracks were-- Sauropod footprints in blue and Theropod in red.

I, however, found my first 'dino' print by stepping in it. A yard-long hollow in the white rock of the riverbed, the experts say it was left by a Sauropod, which was a 70-foot-long, 13-foot-high herbivore. It was these Paluxy River footprints that gave paleontologists their first proof that the Sauropod—at first thought to be a marine mammal--actually walked on land.

The smaller, three-toed prints crisscrossing the riverbed belonged to the Theropod, a highly carnivorous "junior version" of Tyrannosaurus Rex. As we made our way through

the park, we got a 'Flintstone-esque' feeling. Following the clear step-by-step progress of the Sauropod footprints, it was easy to picture an enormous, long-necked "mommy" dinosaur making her way down the river, followed by her young'uns.

Waco Mammoth Site

About an hour further south of Glen Rose is Waco, home to the Waco Mammoth Site. Before heading over, however, we took care of our "mammoth" appetites for lunch at the Health Camp. A Waco tradition, this burger joint opened in 1949 and still operates out of the original small diner "on the Circle" near Baylor University.

Our hunger happily satiated, we arrived at the site, located on 100 acres of beautifully wooded countryside, and went straight to the Dig Shelter, which opened in 2009. Upon entering, we found ourselves on a bridge that overlooked an actual dig site, with the remains of several mammoths still half-encased in the ground.

The skull and tusks we could see were astonishing in size, and imagining a whole herd of these animals roaming the very ground where we stood brought history lumbering to life. The bones of the first mammoth to be unearthed at this location were discovered in 1978. Since then, the skeletons of 24 Columbian mammoths have been excavated, including the nation's first and only discovery of a nursery herd.

The Gault Site

About a half hour south of Waco we arrived in the town of Belton and checked in at the Bell County Museum. There we toured an interactive exhibit about the Gault Site, one of the largest excavated sites of the Clovis people, who are thought to have occupied the region as much as 13,500 years ago.

Large murals showed what the Clovis communities may have looked like, and a film called "The Gault Project: An Adventure in Time" gave us a fuller understanding of the size and significance of the excavation itself.

Armed with our new information, we were ready to go directly to the actual excavation site, just a short half-hour drive southeast. A Texas State Archeological Landmark, the Gault Site has yielded more than two million artifacts as well as examples of the oldest known architecture in North America.

Following all our ancient adventures, we drove a short 45 minutes south, arriving in Austin at twilight, just in time to see the spectacular city skyline. The sight of it was a bit of a shock after spending the day with dinosaurs and mammoths. As a last bow to our prehistoric cave-dweller state of mind, we stopped at Ironworks Bar-B-Que and dug into a big heap of beef ribs.

#TexasToDo

To get a good visual of the animals that made the footprints at Dinosaur Valley State Park, make your first stop at Dinosaur World, located just outside the park entrance. Following the trail through lush greenery, you'll see dozens of eerily authentic life-size models of different dinosaurs (there are 100 in all), including the Sauropod and Theropod, identified as this area's original "track stars."

Fun Fact

Say the word "mammoth" and most people envision the long-haired Woolly Mammoth. However, those shaggy creatures were natives of the more northern climates. The Columbian Mammoth--larger than the Woolly, with less hair but slightly longer tusks-- lived in the more temperate southern zones, like Texas and California. In fact, the mammoths found in Los Angeles' La Brea Tar Pits were Columbian, not Woolly.